

A Time to Defend Labor and the Public Sector

Posted on February 18, 2011 by Rosemary Feurer

Thanks to the leadership that workers in Wisconsin and other states took in the Spring of 2011, Americans seized the opportunity to change the debate about the fiscal crisis in the states, its origins, and the way it was being used to attack the labor movement and to dismantle public services.

Regions: [California](#) [Iowa](#) [Nebraska](#) [North Carolina](#) [Ohio](#) [Wisconsin](#)

In many states LAWCHA members are already playing a role in these discussions. Will Jones and Steve Meyer have been in the news about Wisconsin. In North Carolina, LAWCHA members have pulled together faculty from numerous colleges and universities in a group called North Carolina Protecting the Public Interest to stand with these workers and those who need their services. We urge LAWCHA members to do more to bring our perspectives as labor historians to bear on this crisis.

- [Michael Honey, HNN, "We Are One: Remembering King's Struggle for Labor Rights"](#) April 4, 2011
- [Will Jones, "Address to rally on 43rd Anniversary of Martin Luther King's Assassination"](#) April 4, 2011
- [**Urgent:** Bill Cronon, "A Tactic I Hope Republicans Will Rethink: Using the Open Records Law to Intimidate Critics"](#) March 24, 2011
- [Upcoming Event: Book/Author discussion with former LAWCHA president Michael Honey, *All Labor Has Dignity*, Washington DC, April 4](#) March 23, 2011
- [Michael Schwalbe, CommonDreams.org, "School Woes Rooted in Boardrooms, Not Classrooms"](#) March 11, 2011
- [DPOE, "Why Unions Matter"](#)
- [*The State of Things*, "The State of Collective Bargaining," LAWCHA member Robert Korstad discusses the state and future of collective bargaining](#), March 9, 2011
- [Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The Long History of Labor](#)

Bashing", March 6, 2011

- Shelton Stromquist, Iowa City Press Citizen, "Preserving Collective Bargaining", March 4, 2011
- History for the Future, (LAWCHA Member) Joseph McCartin on Public Sector Unions and Worker Rights in Wisconsin, March 1, 2011
- WHYY Radio, The Future of Public Employee Unions (with Nancy MacLean), February 28, 2011
- Mark Levine, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, "You Heard it Here First: Tax the Rich and Solve Budget Shortfall" February 26, 2011
- Miles Mogulescu, Huffington Post, "Wisconsin is Part of Nationwide Corporate-Funded Movement to Destroy Unions and Undermine the Middle Class", February 25, 2011
- Michael Honey and Dan Jacoby, The News Tribune, "Right Exploits Politics of Envy to Pit Workers Against Each Other", February 24, 2011
- The Marc Steiner Show, Debating collective bargaining rights for state employees in Wisconsin and beyond (with Bill Barry, Anne McCarthy, and Don Taylor), February 23, 2011
- Michael Honey, Color Lines, "It's 1968 All Over Again, and King's Fight For Unions Is Still Essential", February 23, 2011
- Donna Cooper, Center for American Progress, "Infographic: Tax Breaks vs. Budget Cuts", February 22, 2011
- Nelson Lichtenstein, Politico, "Why Everyone Needs Unions", February 21, 2011

California

- Martin J. Bennet, Labor's Edge, "Don't Blame California Public Employees!", February 14, 2011

Iowa

Iowa unions have been spurred to action this week both in solidarity with neighboring Wisconsin workers and in opposition to attacks from Iowa lawmakers. Despite growing resistance to assaults on public employee rights in other Midwestern states, last Friday Iowa House Republicans introduced HSB 117, their own assault on Iowa's 37-year-old public bargaining law. Iowa union members, allies, and elected officials have since mounted strong

and growing opposition.

Iowa's Public Employment Relations Act was signed into law by a Republican governor in 1974. Its passage was presaged by the adoption of similar laws in neighboring states as well as growing pressure from strikes waged by Iowa teachers and firefighters. By all accounts, the system has worked well to promote negotiated settlements of public sector contracts; 98% of public sector contracts in Iowa are settled voluntarily. Those that reach impasse are forwarded to a third-party arbitrator, whose decision is final and binding.

Republicans have pitched their "reform" of Iowa's public bargaining law to the media as a budgetary solution to rising health care costs. The bill would further limit the scope of negotiations, prohibiting bargaining over health insurance, outsourcing, and other items, and would require all public employees to pay at least 30% of the cost of their health insurance.

But as in Wisconsin and other states, the bill's most significant proposals are aimed at stripping fundamental union rights, weakening worker bargaining power, and undermining the purpose of collective bargaining. The bill would, for example, allow either the governor or legislature to reject an arbitrator's decision on state contracts, essentially making collective bargaining meaningless for state employees. Indeed, the provision appears to be an attempt to reverse a 1991 Iowa Supreme Court ruling issued against current Governor Terry Branstad when, during his previous tenure as governor, he attempted to veto pay increases awarded to state employees via the legally binding arbitration process.

Another provision of the bill would allow any public employee to declare him or herself a "free agent," rejecting union representation and coverage under an existing collective bargaining agreement. This proposal strikes at the heart of the principle of "exclusive representation," the foundational legal obligation of an employer to deal with a single, democratically selected union as the bargaining agent for all employees in a given unit. Such a provision could allow employers to offer special deals to individuals who opt out of bargaining unit coverage as a means of weakening bargaining power encouraging decertification elections (after which, complete control of workplace terms and conditions would return to management's hands).

In response, over 2,000 Iowa union members and supporters rallied at the state capitol on February 22 in solidarity with public sector workers in Iowa, Wisconsin, and across the globe. Additional rallies have taken place since in multiple locations around the state, and a second statehouse rally is scheduled for Saturday in Des Moines.

Iowa Democrats have also appeared buoyed by worker protests. In their own show of solidarity, last night minority House Democrats kept a Labor Committee discussion of HSB 117 alive for over 15 hours straight, offering 48 amendments and continuous objection to the bill's attack on bargaining rights. As Rep. Bruce Hunter put it, "You're attacking the workers of the state of Iowa, and when you attack the workers of Iowa, we are going to fight for them." Early this morning, the bill passed out of committee on a party-line vote, but Senate leader Mike Gronstal (who rallied with workers earlier in the week) has already pledged to prevent the bill from coming to the floor in the senate, where Democrats hold a slim majority.

Hundreds of Iowans have made trips to Madison during the past two weeks to join protests there, and union-sponsored buses continue to travel back and forth from eastern Iowa daily. Along with raising their voices, Iowa union members have taken shifts sleeping on the capitol floor, helped direct shuttle bus parking, and transported food donations. Many have returned from Madison transformed and ready to take action of their own. As one of them put it, solidarity is "spreading like fire on the prairie."

Submitted by Jennifer Sherer, Director, University of Iowa Labor Center.

Nebraska

Nebraska is right in the mix of all this anti-union stuff with 8 measures either to restrict public sector bargaining or eliminate it altogether.

- [Bill Pratt, *Omaha World-Herald*, "Midlands Voices: Special Master works well in state labor negotiations", February 25, 2011](#)

North Carolina

A group of LAWCHA members from the Research Triangle Area in November founded North Carolina Protecting the Public Interest, a network of scholars (faculty and graduate students) from colleges and universities throughout the state who have come together to oppose the proposed devastating cuts to public school and service budgets and provide a research center and speakers bureau on these issues for organizations and media. We have almost 100 signatories from over a dozen institutions and, prompted by the struggle in Wisconsin, are now providing news feeds to media and organizations with short lists of our expertise (list in formation attached, as an example for those who would like to start similar efforts elsewhere).

Please visit our website, a template that could easily be copied and modified for other states: <https://lawcha.org/ncprotectingthepublic>.

It's easy to organize a group like this if you have even 2-3 people who can then reach out to contacts elsewhere via email and calls to get it going. Time is of the essence, what with Wisconsin legislators getting ready to vote and the recent Conservative Political Action Conference aggressively promoting similar attacks on public services and workers across the country.

For more information or to send resources or news for our site, please contact ncptpi@gmail.com or Nancy MacLean at nancy.maclea@duke.edu or (919) 937-9409.

- [*NC Justice Center, "TAKE ACTION: Bill to Gut State EITC Goes to Committee This Week," March 4, 2011*](#)
- [*Nancy MacLean, WHYY Radio Interview, "The Future of Public Employee Unions", February 28, 2011*](#)
- [*Jason Brent and Lisa Levenstein, Greensboro News and Record, "Blaming Public Workers a Bad Idea", February 27, 2011*](#)
- [*David Zonderman, "Public Unions Aren't the Bad Guys", February 26, 2011*](#)

Ohio

Things are also heating in Ohio over collective bargaining for public employees.

- [*Brigid O'Farrell, American Rights at Work Blog, "The Right To Join A Union: From Eleanor Roosevelt to John Kasich", April 6, 2011*](#)
- [*Joseph Slater, Cleveland Plain Dealer, "Public Workers Should be able to Bargain", February 27, 2011*](#)

Wisconsin

The most dramatic events, of course, have been occurring in Wisconsin. If you would like to add information to this section, please email [Ryan Poe \(rmp23@duke.edu\)](mailto:rmp23@duke.edu) to have your alerts, links, and information posted.

- [*The Latest on the Recall of Scott Walker*](#)

In the recent months, the campaign to recall Governor Walker has been building, and in the last week has picked up considerable steam. Yesterday, November 28th, 2011, the group United Wisconsin to Recall Walker announced that it obtained an incredible 300,000 signatures in only 12 days! For more information, see the below websites sent to us by LAWCHA members in the Wisconsin area.

- Patrick Marley, "[Recall Group Says it has 300,000 Signatures](#)," *The Journal Sentinel* November 28, 2011
 - Rachel Ida Buff, "[Democracy on the Recall Front](#)," *The Journal Sentinel* November 28, 2011
 - Jason Stein, "[Recall Drive is Picking Up Steam: Signatures Collected at Curbside, Midnight Parties](#)," *The Journal Sentinel* November 26, 2011
 - [**A United Wisconsin to Recall Walker**](#)
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- [Report from Madison, WI, June 6, 2011 from Nikki Mandell](#)

 - [How can I help out in Wisconsin?](#)

 - [Wednesday Report from Madison \(Wednesday, March 16\)](#)
 - [TourDeForce360, Panoramic Photos from Madison \(with sound\)](#)
 - [Sunday Report from Madison \(Sunday, March 13\)](#)
 - [Friday Report from Madison \(Friday, March 11\)](#)
 - [**Live Stream** of the Madison Legislature](#) (Wednesday, March 10, 2011)
 - [Stand with Wisconsin, Twitter Feed from Wisconsin](#) (Wednesday, March 10, 2011)
 - [Tuesday Report from Madison](#) (Tuesday, March 8)
 - [Sunday Report from Madison](#) (Sunday, March 6)
 - [Wednesday Report from Madison](#) (Wednesday, March 2)
 - [Monday Report from Madison](#) (Monday, February 28)
 - [Weekend Solidarity Report from Wisconsin](#) (Saturday, February 26)

- [Update from Will Jones](#) (Tuesday, February 22)
- [The Latest from Nikki Mandell](#) (Sunday, February 20)

Links and Op-Eds about Wisconsin

- [Ezra Klein \(*Washington Post*\) discusses the history of labor and the current situation in Wisconsin with LAWCHA member Nelson Lichtenstein](#), March 10, 2011
- [Bob Bussel, *Eugene Weekly*, "What's at Stake: Wisconsin Showdown is Over Civil Rights"](#), March 2, 2011
- [Christopher Phelps, *The Chronicle Review*, "The Wisconsin Idea"](#), March 2, 2011
- [*History for the Future*, \(LAWCHA Member\) Joseph McCartin on Public Sector Unions and Worker Rights in Wisconsin](#), March 1, 2011
- [David Zirin, *The New Yorker*, "Wisconsin: Packers Back the Protesters"](#), February 28, 2011
- [Leon Fink, *News Observer*, "A Hard Break with Wisconsin's Past"](#), February 27, 2011
- [Jeff Leys, *Truthout*, "Wisconsin: Health Care, Democracy and the Middle Class Are At Stake"](#) February 27, 2011
- [*OneWisconsinNow.org*, 100,000 Strong: Scenes from the Weekend Rally](#), February 26, 2011
- [LAWCHA member and professor of history Ilene Devault discusses the history of public employee unions, collective bargaining, and how the Wisconsin stand-off might play out](#), February 25, 2011
- [Jen Sorenson, *C-VILLE Weekly*, "A Teachable Moment: Lessons for Wisconsin's Governor"](#), February 22, 2011
- [Brigid O'Farrell, *Roosevelt Institute*, "What do Natalie Portman, Aaron Rodgers, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Wisconsin Workers Have in Common?"](#)
- [Andrew E. Kirsten, *Dissent*, "All's Noisy on the Midwestern Front"](#) February 21, 2011
- [Peter Rachleff, *Monthly Review*, "Madison is Our Cairo"](#) February 21, 2011
- [Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill Protest Video Montage](#)

Author



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Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.